Work, Max Weber, Confucianism
The Birth of Capitalism out of the Spirit of Japanese Culture?

The Japanese are conquering world markets through unfair competition – they’re working during working hours!
Ephraim Kishon

Of the numerous volumes on world history produced in the last few years, David Landes’ account is surely the most influential as well as having sold the most copies. In his ‘The Wealth and Poverty of Nations’, he portrays the last thousand years of history from a Eurocentric perspective. This he not only openly acknowledges but in fact propagates offensively: ‘Over the thousand and more years of this process that most people look upon as progress, the key factor – the driving force – has been Western civilization and its dissemination.’¹ Landes explicitly rejects all forms of political correctness and sees only one way for non-European nations to modernise successfully. They must learn from and imitate Europe. In evoking this apotheosis of the ascent of Europe, whose achievements are then imported by the rest of the world, Landes acknowledges a single exception: Japan. He expresses his belief that ‘even without a European industrial revolution, the Japanese would sooner or later have made their own.’ He identifies the reason for this in Japanese culture, or more precisely in the Japanese morality of work, which he believes to be rooted in the country’s religious traditions. Landes thus explains the fact that Japan is the only nation outside of Europe that would have been capable of active, independent modernisation by pointing to the Japanese ‘national character’. He adds: ‘If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference.’²

This perspective is anchored in a thesis that has been widely discussed, and not only in Japan. The connection between Confucianism, work ethic and economic modernisation in Japan was vigorously debated in the 1980s and 1990s, and continues to be to this day in some quarters. While this was a thoroughly political (and economic policy) debate, its claims were also subject to intense academic scrutiny. The ‘Confucianism thesis,’ as I shall call it, is an expression of the notion that Japan’s economic success can be put down to its cultural peculiarity. Here, the dynamism of Japanese capitalism is traced back to a culturally specific economic style. The following attempt to get to grips with this argument is divided into three sections. The first section reconstructs the Confucianism thesis and briefly outlines its individual components. Sections two and three subject this thesis to critical examination. My criticisms relate to the adaptability of this line of argument and the fiction of cultural autonomy upon which it rests. I round off the discussion by arguing that the thesis of Confucian industrial relations can only arise (and be

² Landes, Wealth, p. 368, 516.
maintained) if one continues to regard Japan as a country sealed off from the rest of the world and fails to take account of its manifold interactions with other societies.

I The Confucianism thesis

In the 1980s, the thesis of the ‘birth of Japanese capitalism from the spirit of Confucianism’ was highly popular. The fundamental assumption here was that the dynamics of Japanese modernisation and particularly the rapid economic growth (kōdō seichō) from the 1960s on were due to Japan’s specific industrial relations and the attitudes to work prevalent there. Three dimensions make up the uniqueness of Japanese industrial relations: the principle of life-long employment (shûshin koyô), the principle of seniority in relation to wages (nenkô joretsu) and the organisation of employees in company unions (kigyô kumiai). These organisational features are understood as an expression of a specifically Japanese work mentality and work ethic, which are in turn traced back to indigenous cultural traditions. A this-worldly, active attitude to work seemed built in to Confucian ethics in particular. This attitude, the thesis claims, made Japanese industrialisation and the post-war ‘economic miracle’ possible in the first place.3

In the mid-1950s, American sociologist Robert Bellah was one of the first to attempt to explain Japanese modernisation with reference to the connection between Confucianism and a modern work ethic.4 He transposed Max Weber’s famous attempt to identify the causes of European capitalism – and to understand the historical uniqueness of this process – to the Japanese context. He found what Max Weber had sought in the Confucian tradition: particularly teachings encouraging religiously motivated inner-worldly asceticism (which taught the individual that he would be rewarded in the afterlife if he worked hard, thus laying the ground for the development of an active business class and diligent work force). In Confucianism – above all in the thought of the philosopher and merchant Ishida Baigan writing in the early 18th century – Bellah discovered an organic conception of society based on the division of labour and a tendency towards the rationalisation of economic thought. Finally, Bellah was convinced that Confucian ethics were linked with the dynamics and rigidity of bushidô, the ethical code of the Samurai class.5

This thesis, which initially inspired much criticism, particularly in Japan, has enjoyed a second career since the 1980s, when the Japanese economy was peaking. The best-known book in this vein was probably ‘Why Has Japan Succeeded?’ by economist Morishima Michio, translated into numerous languages. Morishima also views Confucianism and its work ethic as the key to Japan’s success. However, he includes a political factor: while a passive-apolitical Confucianism prevailed in China, he claims that the Japanese adoption of this religious tradition led to a worldview

supportive of the ruling class. On this view, loyalty was therefore a basic feature of Confucian-influenced Japanese culture – a loyalty that might be directed at the state or the firm.\(^6\)

Morishima’s explanation of Japan’s economic development resonated widely and was eagerly taken up by economic historians and management scholars. The notion that there is a connection between Confucianism and the modern work ethic has found general acceptance, though some authors have also placed emphasis on other worldviews – those of Buddhism, Shintôism, or Samurai ethics. The economic rise of the ‘little tigers’ – South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong – lent support to the Confucianism thesis, their development making the link between Confucian tradition and capitalist-economic performance appear yet more plausible.\(^7\)

The discussion was not confined to the Japanese (or Asian) case, but also seemed to concern ‘us’: Japan’s swift economic ascent and potential to become the greatest economic power in the world seemed to threaten the future and the societal self-concept of the ‘West’ (symbolic transactions such as the purchase of little castles on the Rhine or the takeover of CBS and half of Hollywood played a special role here). Thus, Western managers were sometimes encouraged to study bushidô, the Samurai ethical code from the 17th century, in order to prepare themselves for the realities of the Japanese business world. The Japanese form of work, however, was not merely viewed as a threat: in Europe and the United States many attempts were made to adopt Japanese ways of organising work and management practices. Discussions of the Japanese work ethic were thus not only about Japan, but always about the ‘West’ as well.\(^8\)

II Genealogy of a discourse

In what follows, I wish to subject this explanatory approach to critical examination and show that the deduction of the modern work ethic from the spirit of Confucianism is at bottom a retrospective construction. This does not mean that the thesis and the issues underpinning it lack all validity. In principle, the search for continuities of culture and mentality and attempts to tease out the ‘traditional’ roots of modern Japanese society are entirely justified and may lead to fruitful insights. My critique, however, concerns the image of Japan which this thesis conveys, which I believe to be problematic.

The moment one analyses the logic of the Confucianism thesis more closely, a number of difficulties emerge, which are already present in the original Weberian formulation and which are outlined here only briefly.\(^9\) The starting point itself is paradoxical: the more the impact of religious

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traditions wanes, these analyses imply, the greater their long-term cultural impact seems to be. The full impact of Calvinist and Confucian ethics thus appears to be felt only in secular society.\textsuperscript{10} There is another problem. While the rapid economic growth of the 19th and 20th centuries is causally related to religious texts from the 16th and 17th century, these cultural traditions are rarely mentioned to explain the decline of the hard-working mentality in the post-war period (in Japan, this decline has been proven statistically and debated intensively since the 1990s).\textsuperscript{11} In any case, equating a society’s culture and mentality with its religious canon seems problematic.\textsuperscript{12} In the following, however, two objections are raised specifically related to the Japanese case.

1. The first objection relates to the plasticity of the argument (one might even say its chameleon-like adaptability). In its most general form, the Confucianism thesis suggests that Japan’s economic success rests upon its special industrial relations – a familial structure within the firm (kazoku shugi) and a fundamental harmony (wa) between employers and employees – which are understood as the legacy of Confucianism. This has been the prevailing view since the 1980s and is highly popular in both Japan and the West.\textsuperscript{13} However, a closer look at Japanese history shows that this thesis itself has to be grasped in its social and historical context.\textsuperscript{14} The evaluation of the Confucian heritage has changed radically over the last few decades. In the early post-war period, for example, surviving cultural traditions and social customs were still primarily viewed as obstacles on the path of modernisation. In fact, the familial structure of Japanese firms was mentioned as evidence that the Japanese economy was still feudal in nature. Paternalistic industrial relations were by no means viewed as the key to economic success, but rather as a symptom of Japanese backwardness.\textsuperscript{15}

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In the 1950s, specifically Japanese working conditions were therefore regarded as a problem and were criticised heavily. The fact that these existed was not however seriously disputed. Yet if we trace the genealogy of this debate and turn to the inter-war period, we discover that the notion of the uniqueness of Japanese working conditions played little role (though this discourse was by no means monolithic and other notions sometimes competed with it). After the First World War, trade unions emerged in Japan and a communist and socialist party were founded. The 1920s saw frequent pay negotiations and conflicts over the passing of legislation on health and safety standards at work. The general consensus – not only among reformers, but also most businessmen – was that Japan’s economy faced problems no different from those in the West: a large working class, the rise of trade unions and conflicts over wages and conditions.

Only when we turn to the Meiji era (1868-1912), the period following the foundation of the modern nation state on the Western model, do we once again encounter the rhetoric of the special character of Japanese industrial relations – though only from the 1880s on. In the first few years after the Meiji Restoration, influenced by the import of European economic theory, broad consensus still prevailed that Confucian concepts of business were a hindrance to successful modernisation. Only when the euphoric ‘Westernisation’ came to an end around 1880 does Confucianism again appear as a tradition worth preserving. One now encounters the topos of ‘beautiful customs’ (bijû), which characterise the sphere of production and the world of work, at every turn. In the exemplary words of a representative of the Mitsubishi shipyard: Since ancient times, Japan has possessed the beautiful custom of master-servant relations based firmly on a spirit of sacrifice and compassion, a custom not seen in the many other countries of the world. Because of this relationship, the employer loves the employee and the employee respects his master. We would however be missing something were we to view Confucianist discourse merely as an obscuring ideology of the employers. ‘Pre-modern’ values also played a role in workers’ protests from time to time. Reference to ‘traditional’ conceptions was not only an instrument of repression but also of resistance.

This brief sketch illustrates how the topos of unique, Confucianist industrial relations could lead to quite different assessments. Depending on the political and economic context, cultural traditions (if they were considered decisive in the first place) could either appear as catalyst of or obstacle to modernisation à la japonaise. Our glance back at the Meiji era, moreover, has already intimated that the notion of specifically Japanese industrial relations, which in turn alluded to indigenous social traditions, arose at a time when industrial production was taking off in Japan. We are

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16 This is evident in the central role ascribed to Confucian traditions in explaining Japanese backwardness. See, for example, Kawashima Takeyoshi’s particularly influential Nihon shakai no kazokuteki kôzô, Tokyo 1950. Another representative example is the labour economist Okôchi Kazuo, see for instance his Nihon no rôdôsha kaikyû, Tokyo 1955.


18 For a general examination, see Andrew Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, Berkeley 1991; Sheldon Garon, The State and Labor in Modern Japan, Berkeley 1987; see also William M. Tsutsui, Manufacturing Ideology. Scientific Management in Twentieth-Century Japan, Princeton 1998. This attitude was reinforced by the intensive reception of Marxism in the 1920s; see Germaine Hoston, Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan, Princeton 1992.


20 Quoted in Gordon, Invention, p. 21.

21 See Gordon, Labor, p. 73.
dealing here, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, with an ‘invented tradition’, which was not simply ‘natural’ but also constructed. This is apparent in the very neologisms, such as kazoku shugi (familism) and onjô shugi (paternalism), coined during this period to express the development of new social practices – and to manage them.  

III The history of interconnections and the ‘invention of a tradition’

Now this invention of traditions, and this is my second criticism, was not only the result of attempts to ensure the survival of a cultural heritage, but equally the product of a history of interconnections and interaction. The discourse on Confucian industrial relations not only linked a modern (or at least modernising) present with the national past (temporally), but was just as much a reaction to changed transnational relations of exchange (spatially). The modern work ethic and industrial relations in businesses and factories arose in Japan during a period of intensive contact with the West. As a ‘late comer’, Japan took Europe as its model for industrial development. Regardless of the fiction of cultural autonomy that the Confucianism thesis implies, the modern conception and practice of work also arose in the context of these interactions and interconnections.

A good example of this predicament is the history of the silk spinning mill in Tomioka, founded by the Japanese government in 1872. In the first few years of the Meiji state, economic liberalisation had led to palpable trade deficits and strains on the national budget. The foreign trade deficit was largely the result of the import of English cotton. At the same time, however, there was demand for Japanese silk on the European market. The government thus decided to improve the quality and promote the production of Japanese silk. A model factory was set up in Tomioka, and 18 French technicians were employed to familiarise the newly trained Japanese workers with European technology. Over the next few years, the now more experienced workers were transferred to newly founded silk spinning mills, to train new employees in the know-how they had acquired in Tomioka. Most of these new factories were built in the countryside far from the cities, and the workers had to be recruited from far and wide. Factory work thus meant a new experience that entailed changes in social relations (including, for instance, new work hierarchies, separation from one’s family and living in a workers’ hostel).

The inculcation of modern work discipline in Tomioka and subsequently in other factories throughout the country can thus hardly be separated from the simultaneous introduction of European technology, from the knowledge of experts and conceptions of work. It is by no means my intention here to claim that the modern conception of work and modern industrial relations in Japan are merely imports from Europe. Yet they changed decisively and enduringly in a context whose dynamics were shaped significantly by the process of coming to terms with the ‘West’. Economic historian Taira Koji has for example shown that ‘lifelong employment’ and the ‘seniority principle’ applied to wages were by no means expressions of Confucian traditions; these forms of Japanese workplace organisation in fact arose only when the world market was gripped by crisis, when employers (initially in heavy industry) wished to tie skilled workers to the firm by means of annual wage increases. Japanese industrial relations were thus more than a mere import

from the ‘West’. Yet it would be equally false to portray them as a tradition, rooted in the pre-modern era, of tying workers to one company only and of lifelong commitment to a firm understood as a replacement family.\textsuperscript{24}

The political and intellectual transmission of knowledge about ‘work’ also took place in a context characterised by appropriation and blurred boundaries. The ‘Association for Social Policy’ (\textit{shakai seisaku gakkai}), for example, which was founded in 1896 and had a huge influence on government policies, clearly drew heavily on its German forebear, which a number of students and economists had got to know during their travels in Europe. At the same time, however, the concept of harmony between labour and capital also tallied with notions characteristic of the Confucianist economic policies of the Tokugawa period. Kanai Noboru, a key figure in the ‘Association for Social Policy’ and well acquainted with the German debate after studies in Halle, Heidelberg and Berlin, made particularly important contributions to this fusion of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ concepts of industrial relations and political economy.\textsuperscript{25}

The government made a concerted effort to encourage diligence among workers as the country industrialised, a policy intended to inculcate modern work discipline. This included banning the after-lunch rest in public. The manuals produced for young women textile workers were intended to meet the demands made on an emerging industrial workforce in more concrete fashion. Here, one learned for example that ‘if you all work to the utmost of your abilities from morning to night, there can be no loyalty to the country greater than this. If you do not work thus and stay idly at home, the country of Japan will become poorer and poorer. Therefore, work with all your might for the country's sake, enabling Japan to become the greatest country in the world’\textsuperscript{26}

This policy of encouraging diligence seemed necessary in order to create a workforce accustomed to modern work discipline. Once again, though, ‘promoting diligence’ was not just a disciplining strategy ‘from above’, but was also one of the ‘technologies of the self’ through which individuals demonstrated their ‘modernity’. These technologies were also related to expectations that had entered Japan through interaction with the ‘West’. In point of fact, to many European observers who came to Japan in the 1870s, the Japanese by no means seemed the diligent and hard-working people familiar from modern clichés. Economist Karl Rathgen for example told his German readership of a lack of enthusiasm for work among the Japanese: ‘What is as yet little known in Japan is continuous work. This seems to me a large part of the explanation for the fact, confirmed by every foreigner, that Japanese workers work relatively little and that all work progresses only slowly’.\textsuperscript{27} Max Nitzsche agreed: ‘Continual, intensive work is nothing less than detestable to the average Japanese. He has no interest in working long hours if he can work slowly. He constantly stops and takes a break, to sing, smoke, chat or sip his tea’.\textsuperscript{28} The so-called ‘Confucian’ work ethic, supposedly anchored in traditions hundreds of years old, apparently required lots of practice – this at least is what many in Japan as well as European observers believed. A few decades later, this impression had already changed profoundly. The Japanese were increasingly thought of as industrious and disciplined workers and the term ‘Yellow Peril’ was doing the rounds in Europe.

\textsuperscript{26} Quotation from the Factory Girls Reader, a 1911 manual, quoted in: Tsurumi, \textit{Factory Girls}, p. 94.  
\textsuperscript{27} Karl Rathgen, \textit{Japans Volkswirtschaft und Staatshaushalt}, Leipzig 1891, p. 422.  
By no means did this evoke a purely military and cultural threat, but also fears of ‘competition between White and Yellow labour’.29

The sense of a break with earlier types of working practices reflected in these observations corresponded to the gradual taking hold of industrial forms of production. Nonetheless, Meiji Japan was to remain a primarily agrarian country for some decades to come. The discourse of work was thus more than simply the effect of changed industrial relations in the wake of industrialisation. It was at the same time a reaction to the profound social upheavals of the time. A key component of changed industrial relations was the slackening of social ties as a result of the dissolution of the feudal order. One of the first steps taken by the Meiji government was the abolition of all regulations restricting the freedom of labour, which had dominated the social structure of Japanese society during the Tokugawa period. From 1869, all legal obstacles to finding a new job and taking up an occupation out of sync with one’s inherited social position were abolished. At the same time, the discourse on work was now closely related to the new nation state. The notion of work that took shape in the debates of the time was thus loaded with connotations rooted in quite different contexts: the dissolution of feudal labour relations, the new capitalist order, theories of political economy transposed from Europe, the demands of industrial production and the ideologies of the nation state.

The reorganisation of social practices was a departure from accustomed paradigms, and this unsettling experience found terminological expression. The common terms for ‘work’ no longer seemed to jibe with the changed realities. All of these expressed the social context within which the work was carried out. Suke for example was the work done by the personally dependent as compensation and thanks for borrowed land, for animals or a house. Yui referred to an exchange of labour between two individuals on the same social level, such as mutual neighbourly assistance in planting rice. Hōkō was the service owed by family servants, who were quasi-members of the family. A number of other words for work existed independent of social relations, but they related exclusively to the physical aspect of work (shigoto, hataraki, kasegi). It proved extremely difficult to find a term for work within a social context but free of the notion of obligation to others. None of the existing terms could be applied to factory work, which was based on a contract freely entered into by autonomous and equal partners. It was only around the turn of the century that the term commonly used to this day (rôdô) gained general acceptance.30

These terminological difficulties illustrate the contemporary impression of a profound turning point in the practice of work and its place in society in the first decades of the Meiji era. From this point forward, work was at the centre of a wider and more comprehensive discourse, which linked individual and society in new and complex ways. Not only did the conception of ‘work’ change, but the modern nation and the individual (as subject of the nation state) were simultaneously reconstituted with the help of ‘work’.


This complex situation is well illustrated by the national stylisation of young working women. Industrialisation, which the government did much to stimulate, was certainly an important component of the ‘self-strengthening movement’ (fukoku kyōhei) of the Meiji period and thus helped produce conceptions of masculinity, both collective ideals of national strength and individual concepts of male work. At the same time, however, the large number of young, single women in the workforce was one of the special features of Japanese economic development (in international comparison). The cotton and silk spinning mills were among the first branches of production to be industrialised and were thus a key component of the early phase of Japanese industrialisation. In line with the textile industry’s importance to the Japanese economy, women made up more than 60% of the entire industrial workforce as late as 1909. Their huge contribution to the work of the nation made of these women national subjects – while their work was represented as essentially Japanese. This nationalisation of work was a universal feature of Meiji era discourse, transcending differences in social background and political leanings. A socialist such as Hirasawa Keiichi could thus assert: ‘Observing the almost magicianlike dexterity of the hands of factory women, I thought that only women could undertake this kind of work. I also intuitively felt that only Japanese women (Nippon no onna), not Western women, could. The Japanese woman (Nippon no fujin), who identifies sewing with the female vocation, is already destined to develop the dexterity of her hands from the time she is in her mother’s womb.’

Women, especially from agricultural regions, became national subjects through their labour. In the first years of the Meiji era, the Samurai daughter was still viewed as the incarnation of the Japanese character. This changed around the turn of the century. One of the invented traditions of modern Japan is the notion that the true, authentic ‘Japan’ can be found in the villages and countryside. Folklore was among the disciplines which institutionalised this idea. However, the new role which rural women took on in the country’s economic modernisation also played a part here. In the early 1870s, even factory work was dominated by the higher social classes. In the early days, it was mainly the daughters of samurai and big landowners who were recruited to work in the newly established textile factories (in Tomioka among other places); they saw this as a task of national importance entirely suited to their social standing. From the 1880s on, they were replaced by young girls from peasant households, sold to the factories by their impoverished parents. This change affecting the actors of industrialisation – expressed symbolically in the subtle adjustment of the terminology (the term for ‘woman factory worker’ was now jokô rather than kôjo) – also facilitated a shift in how women from peasant regions and social classes were represented.

The fact that the overwhelming majority of the workers were female also inspired a Meiji-era debate dealing specifically with the risks involved in factory work. Proposals for a law on health and safety at work (introduced only in 1911), for example, provided for prohibition of strenuous night work by women – not only because it conflicted with specific rights enjoyed by employees, but also because it threatened to impair women’s reproductive potential. Workplace hygiene was also subject to discussion, the desire to protect Japanese mothers again playing a central role. Japanese women workers’ status as subjects was thus linked to conceptions of the gender-specific nature of work. At the same time, women were integrated into a national discourse; their status was related to their contribution to the national cause, in the sphere of both production and reproduction.

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32 See Tamanoi, Shadow, esp. ch. 4.
The individual’s self-conception and social status were linked with work and his or her place in the labour market; the nation state was also increasingly judged in terms of its economic policy achievements and the results of ‘national work’ (GNP in modern parlance). Work was measured, its product exhibited, counted, compared; work became a national project. Enforcing a modern work ethic was part of Japan’s modernisation, through which it wished to establish itself as an equal member of the family of nations. In this context, work was nothing less than synonymous with distance from the pre-modern past, with the non-traditional.

The concepts of work, modernity and nation were thus interwoven and partially identified with one another, as is well illustrated in the incorporation of Okinawa into the Japanese state. The transnational framework of interconnections, within which the modern conception and practice of work developed in Japan, not only linked the country with Europe and the ‘West’, but also with neighbouring regions in Asia. Okinawa was subject to dual suzerainty in the 19th century and paid tribute to both Japan and China. In 1879, the island group was annexed by Japan and subjected to a strict policy of assimilation during the subsequent decades, intended to make reliable ‘Japanese’ of its inhabitants. Alongside political integration and language policy, work and work discipline played a key role in this process.

The development of a work ethic and ‘Japanisation’ followed the logic of progress: the inhabitants of the southern island chain were to be freed from their backwardness and introduced to modernity by means of work. As late as 1903, people from Okinawa – alongside Ainu, Koreans and Taiwanese – were presented as members of retarded tribal communities at the great industrial exhibition in Osaka; Okinawa was still Japan’s ‘Other’, and in public consciousness its inhabitants as yet scarcely figured as part of the nation. This changed in the wake of labour migration on a massive scale, which brought a large number of Okinawans to the industrial areas of Osaka. They attempted to counter the discrimination they initially encountered by assimilating everyday and working practices. Over the course of the 1920s, a reform movement emerged that aimed to organise and manage the process of self-disciplining. Toyokawa Tadayuki, one of its leading activists, put the reformers’ central concern in a nutshell: ‘What makes me wring my hands in despair – each time I go abroad or leave Osaka – is our people’s frivolous attitude. ... We have to work day and night to cultivate an attitude of diligence’. To acquire diligence and modern work discipline, cast aside Okinawa’s traditions and become ‘Japanese’ – for him, these were all part of a single process.

IV Transnational history rather than the ‘clash of civilisations’
The Confucianism thesis, which has become highly popular since the 1980s, postulates a connection between the Confucian heritage and the specific characteristics of Japanese capitalism. More generally, it puts Japan’s successful economic modernisation down to the country’s cultural traditions. Here, Japanese history is not interpreted primarily as ‘Westernisation’. The emphasis is instead on continuities with the ‘pre-modern’ era.

34 On what follows, see Tomiyama Ichirō, Kindai Nihon shakai to ‘Okinawajin’, Tokyo 1990.
This thesis presents two problems. First, its popularity in the academic literature and beyond can be understood only against the background of Japan’s economic growth in the 1980s. Yet as recently as the 1950s, during the post-war recession, the Confucian legacy was considered a veritable obstacle to economic development (while it was regarded as utterly irrelevant in the inter-war period). We are thus dealing with a plastic, adaptable argument. Secondly, this approach is anchored in the fiction of cultural autonomy. It thus overlooks the interconnections and interdependencies that played such a crucial role in the development of the modern work ethic and labour relations. In late 19th century Japan, notions of work changed fundamentally as the country came to terms with the ‘West’ and its Asian neighbours (within a colonial framework).

This is not to suggest that the issue of differing economic cultures is entirely irrelevant. It is apparent that enduring social traditions influence the specific form of economic processes or find expression in them. Against claims frequently made within the sociological literature, the regulation of the modern working world did not simply develop in line with the functional demands of industrial society. The specific combination of actors, but also different national cultures (of law for instance) were in fact responsible for the particular historical development of institutional systems. From time to time, specific national ‘styles’ formed in this process. These should however be viewed not merely as the natural product of a ‘national culture’, but also as a result of comparison, differentiation and transfer.

For the most part, however, the concept of ‘economic cultures’ is used in a quite different way, and is understood as an expression of autonomous cultural spheres. This concept of culture is sometimes seen as a reaction to the impositions of a modernity apparently levelling everything in its path and the fear that cultural peculiarities will be subsumed in universal processes. In most cases, the attempt to hold on to the significance of cultural specifics is no longer the result of an anti-modern impulse, but part of efforts to pluralise theories of modernity. Thus, when the authors of the so-called ‘Japan discourse’ (nihonjinron) discuss the possibility of a specifically Japanese modernity (and the Confucianism thesis is a case in point), the underlying motivation is not a desire to ‘overcome modernity’ as pertained as late as the 1930s, but to explain it differently. The debate on the role of ‘Asian values’ in relation to Chinese modernisation also fits within this context. This is not primarily an attempt to find an alternative to capitalist modernity but to anchor it in Chinese traditions.

This emphasis on unique cultural paths is part of the attempt (which is being stepped up in the current era of globalisation) by many intellectuals in the (former) Third World to emancipate

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37 See for example Peter Wagner et al. (eds.), Arbeit und Nationalstaat. Frankreich und Deutschland in europäischer Perspektive, Frankfurt am Main 2000.

38 For an introduction to nihonjinron, see Aoki Tamotsu, Der Japandiskurs im historischen Wandel. Zur Kultur und Identität einer Nation, Munich 1996.

themselves from Eurocentric interpretations of modernity. Here, as a rule, modernity is no longer understood as a foreign body or European imposition; such thinkers in fact seek to correlate it to local traditions. The risk here, however, is that one might end up cultivating an ‘anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism’, as Immanuel Wallerstein has put it. Here, capitalism is derived from the cultural resources of non-European societies, and indigenised to some extent. In this way, according to Wallerstein, a parochial European development and product of historical processes is stylised as a universalism, as one bestows upon it whatever cultural roots apply in the individual country’s case. Capitalism thus becomes stylised as an unexamined, universal process without actors, a force of nature (beyond society). This derivation of capitalism from autochthonous traditions, he asserts, fails to acknowledge the central role played by Europe and America in the historical process of globalisation, instead projecting the results of this process back into the past.

The Confucianism thesis, to return to our main theme, can also be understood as a reaction against the assumption of a universal, unidirectional process of modernisation, which continues to dominate the writing of history. In contrast, the Confucianism thesis operates with a notion of cultural uniqueness and autochthonous development. A ‘universal brotherhood’ characteristic of world history – that is, the universalist assumption that capitalist relations produce uniform wage structures, working conditions, etc. – thus stands in contrast to a ‘universal otherhood’, which renders absolute the specific features of the Japanese working world. Universalism confronts nativism (one might also call it cultural fundamentalism).

In both cases, however, the actual interactions and (mostly asymmetrical) exchange relations, which have characterised the world since at least the mid-19th century, are ignored. Rather than giving up a universal model only to embrace the notion of islands of particularity, we should focus on exchange and (by no means equal, often colonial) interaction when grappling with non-European history. We cannot of course assume that everything under the sun was linked and entangled to the same degree, in the same way and at all times. Nonetheless, scrutinising transnational contexts provides an important corrective to notions of cultural particularity, which continue to saturate most metanarratives of modernisation.

Discussions of how capitalism arose in the context of transnational interconnections point in this direction, the debate on Eric Williams’ thesis being a good example. According to him, capitalism was by no means developed in Europe, but can be traced back to economic exchanges between

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42 For a similar approach, see also Arif Dirlik, Modernity as history. Post-revolutionary China, globalization and the question of modernity, in: *Social History* 27, 2002, p. 16-39.

European colonial powers and the great island plantations of the Caribbean. In his study of the ‘sweet power’ of sugar, Sidney Mintz has described how the specific methods of production on the Caribbean sugar plantations pre-empted forms of capitalist and industrial production in Europe. In his important book, Kenneth Pomeranz has recently shown that the key turning point in European economic history, the taking hold of industrial capitalism from around 1800, is comprehensible ‘only when Europ’s complex and often violent relations with other parts of the globe’ are taken into account.

Rather than projecting internal and culturally autonomous temporal axes and searching traditions for the ‘origins’ of an indigenous capitalism, synchronous interconnections should take centre stage in a relational history of modernity. Against the logic of the Confucianism thesis, I propose that we should always understand the past as the history of transnational interconnections. Japanese history, in any event, would be unthinkable without interaction with China and Europe – and interconnections with Asia and other parts of the non-European world are just as crucial to the history of Europe.


